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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000587

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/22/2016  
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SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE 12/22

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Classified By: DCM Ted Mann, 1.4 (B) and (D)

#### Summary

1. (C) In a statement issued after the conclusion of its meeting 12/22, the Great Council of Chiefs reaffirmed the status of the appointed President and Vice President. The Council condemned the coup, but recognizing the reality of the military takeover, called for the PM to resign. The Council asked the President to appoint an interim administration to rule Fiji until elections could be held, based on the advice of a proposed "privy council" composed of stakeholders in Fiji's political process. The RFMF, which had earlier declared that it no longer recognizes the GCC or its decisions, refused to meet a GCC delegation which wanted to explain the proposal. A meeting may take place after Christmas. Commander Bainimarama said in a press interview that he had heard from the UN that Fiji's peacekeeping operations would not be impacted by the coup. France announced military and travel sanctions against Fiji. The PIF Secretariat said PNG had agreed to replace Fiji as Forum Chair.

#### GCC Statement Issued

2. (SBU) The GCC "reached consensus" and released a statement 12/22 with the following main points:

--The GCC condemns the unlawful overthrow of Fiji's democratically elected government and reaffirms its support for democracy and the rule of law;

--It notes the political reality that the military is in control;

--The GCC reaffirms that President Iloilo and Vice President Madraiwiwi remain in office, despite the military commander's claim he has usurped executive authority;

--It advises the Prime Minister to resign in light of his inability to carry out his constitutional duties;

--The GCC calls on the RFMF Commander to order his troops to "return to camp"; and

--The GCC recommends that President Iloilo appoint an interim administration to return Fiji to early elections and constitutional government.

## Interim Administration Proposal

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13. (SBU) The GCC proposes that the President establish a "privy council" to advise him how to establish the interim government. Representatives of the GCC, the military, Qarase's SDL party, and other political parties would be represented. The privy council will recommend a choice for Prime Minister and the membership of the interim government. Upon the appointment of the interim government, the RFMF will "return to camp." In other parts of the document, the GCC states that in addition to the President, the military, the GCC, and various political parties, VP Madraiwiwi and PM Qarase should have a role in helping determine the "roadmap" to take Fiji forward.

## No Mention of Immunity; Discord over Status of President and Vice President

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14. (SBU) The GCC document makes no mention of immunity for coup leaders and soldiers. This was apparently the subject of considerable discussion, but lawyers advised against any GCC statements on the issue, leaving that to the proposed interim government. Media reports indicate that the issue of the status of the President was the source of discord at the meetings, with Lt. Colonel Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba Mara, a high ranking chief for Lau and one of the coup leaders, arguing that Bainimarama had taken executive authority from the President and that Iloilo therefore needed to be reappointed. The other chiefs clearly did not agree.

## Military Refuses to Meet GCC Now; Perhaps After Christmas

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15. (SBU) The GCC held up publication of the statement for several hours. Apparently the Council wanted to present its proposal to the military before making it public. Commander Bainimarama refused a meeting, stating that he had other scheduled appointments. According to media reports, the

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Commander has agreed to a meeting next week, after Christmas.

## Qarase Says He'd Consider Resigning

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16. (SBU) In a television interview after the GCC proposal was released, PM Qarase said he would consider resigning if it is in the best interests of the country. He said he'd need to study the GCC proposal more fully, and consult with colleagues and advisors.

## Military Says it "Does Not Recognize" the GCC

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17. (C) When it became clear the evening of 12/21 that the GCC was not going to totally cave in to the military, the military spokesman issued a statement that "the RFMF does not recognize the GCC." In a radio interview 12/22, Commodore Bainimarama said "we are now running the country and people have to accept it." "No one will stand in our way to clean up the government, not even the chiefs." Pulling out his standard "corruption" trump card, Bainimarama alleged that Bokini and Adi Litia Qionibaravi of the GCC Secretariat (fired last week by the Commander as CEO of the Fijian Affairs Board) were using the GCC for personal gain. He said the only GCC head who had moved the Council in the right direction in recent years was former RFMF head (and apparent coup supporter) Ratu Epeli Ganilau. We understand that Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba Mara gave Bainimarama updates throughout the GCC meetings. Apparently, Bainimarama did not like what he heard.

## Bainimarama Says UN Peacekeeping Missions Intact

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18. (C) During the radio interview, Bainimarama said he had received a note from the Under Secretary of Political Affairs at the United Nations, affirming that while the UN does not agree with the actions taken by the RFMF, Fiji's operations

in the UN peacekeeping arena would continue. Bainimarama also insisted Fiji is taking steps to resume normal relations with other countries, pointing to the Melanesian Spearhead Group delegation now in Suva.

#### The Commander's Thin Skin Shows

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¶9. (C) In the radio interview, Bainimarama lashed out at the small group of democracy advocates who have built a "democracy shrine" outside Suva and who demonstrated outside the GCC venue yesterday. He said the group is "really irritating the military," and alleged that the advocates' stand for democracy is a smokescreen engineered by the SDL. Bainimarama also warned PM Qarase to stop making comments from his home island of Lau. Otherwise, he said, the military will have to take steps to cut off Qarase's communications links with the outside world. (Comment: We hear that Fiji Telecom and Vodafone protested the military's earlier written order to cut off telephone links to Qarase's home island, noting the inconvenience, possible lawsuits and bad publicity it would bring. The military reportedly then rescinded the order.)

#### France Announces Sanctions; New Zealand Amends Travel Advisory

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¶10. (U) France announced 12/22 that it has suspended military ties with Fiji and will not issue visas to members of the military or civilians involved in the coup. All visits by Fiji military officials to France or French territories are suspended, as are any encounters and exercises between the two militaries.

¶11. (U) New Zealand downgraded its travel advisory, recommending against non-essential travel to Suva, but no longer warning its citizens to avoid travel to the rest of Fiji. This makes the New Zealand advisory roughly equivalent to the U.S. Public Announcement language on travel to Fiji.

#### PNG is Forum Chair

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¶12. (U) The Pacific Island Forum Secretariat announced today that PNG President Somare will take over as Forum Chair. Forum Secretary General Greg Urwin said the RFMF has prevented PM Qarase from exercising his leadership of the government of Fiji and made it impossible to fulfill his duties as Forum Chair. Urwin said PNG would assume the position of Chair until a lawful head of government in Fiji was in place to re-occupy the position.

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#### Comment

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¶13. (C) The military is clearly not happy with several aspects of the GCC proposal. Only if the military shows some willingness to compromise will the GCC have any hope of influencing how Fiji resolves the crisis caused by the military takeover. The RFMF has shown no such signs of flexibility to date.

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